

West African, Central American Conferences Explore Science-Based Solutions for Accelerating Agricultural Productivity

By Eric Van Chantfort

Two regional conferences an ocean apart brought the message and promise of agricultural science and technology to Central America and West Africa earlier this year.

The participants, including government ministers and several heads of state, discussed the costs and benefits of specific technologies as well as the larger issues of hunger, poverty and economic development. They emerged with new initiatives and commitments to strengthen cooperation, expand local scientific expertise and increase access to beneficial agricultural and food technologies, including biotechnology.

USDA cosponsored the regional conferences as part of the broader effort to continue the work begun at the June 2003 Ministerial Conference and Expo on Agricultural Science and Technology in Sacramento, CA. That groundbreaking conference drew high-level officials,

researchers and other delegates from 117 nations, at the invitation of U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Ann M. Veneman (see **AgExporter**, November 2003).

It was one of the largest gatherings ever to address the role that science and technology, combined with supportive policies, can play in helping developing countries raise their agricultural productivity.

According to international experts, even small productivity gains can make a big difference in the lives of chronically hungry people, who number nearly 850 million worldwide. For agriculture-dependent, low-income economies, increased productivity in the farm and food chain can reduce hunger, improve nutrition and health, elevate living standards and spur economic growth.

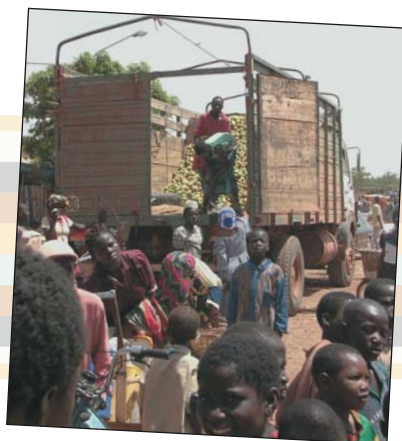
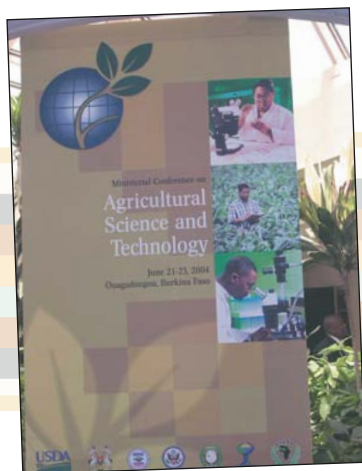
Like the 2003 Sacramento ministerial, the two regional follow-up conferences brought political leaders together with scientists and other experts to share ideas on technologies, policies and partnerships to boost productivity in an environmentally sustainable way.

Secretary Veneman led the U.S. delegation to the Central American conference in Costa Rica, May 10-11, 2004.

Under Secretary J.B. Penn, who heads USDA's Farm and Foreign Agricultural Services, led U.S. participation at the West African conference held in Burkina Faso June 21-23. The U.S. Department of State and USAID (the U.S. Agency for International Development) joined USDA in cosponsoring the ministerial conferences.

Local cosponsors of the Central American conference included Costa Rica's Ministry of Agriculture, its Ministry of Science and Technology, and IICA (the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture). Seven Central American countries, Mexico and the Dominican Republic participated along with the United States.

The Burkina Faso Ministry of Agriculture, Water and Fisheries Resources hosted and cosponsored the West African conference, which was also endorsed by the Economic Community of West African States, the West African Economic and Monetary Union and the Permanent Interstate Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel. Fourteen West African countries were among the 22 countries represented.



West Africa Embraces Biotech's Promise

Technology-themed banners adorned the city as delegates to the three-day West African ministerial met in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso's capital. Four of the region's presidents—Blaise Compaore of Burkina Faso, John Kufuor of Ghana, Amadou Toumani Toure of Mali and Mamadou Tandja of Niger—participated in the opening ceremonies and presented remarks.

The initial proposal for a West African regional conference had come from Burkina Faso's government. Like many of its neighbors in sub-Saharan Africa, Burkina Faso is a proud but poor country. Average per capita income is less than \$1 a day, and an estimated 80 percent of the population relies on subsistence agriculture.

In addition to the presidents, the conference attracted 18 ministers and more than 300 total delegates, as well as African, European and international press. Representing the United States, Under Secretary Penn was accompanied by Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Pamela E. Bridgewater and other USDA, State Department and USAID officials.

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Officially titled the Ministerial Conference on Harnessing Science and Technology To Increase Agricultural Productivity in Africa: West African Perspectives, it featured more than 40 presentations by high-level officials, scientists and other experts from Africa, the United States, Europe and other regions around the world.

In her videotaped welcome message, Secretary Veneman said, "Our goal is to support and accelerate technological progress within Africa. We want to increase access to beneficial agricultural and food technologies, and to help build scientific capacity and expertise within Africa."

She also announced that Africans would be among the first group of participants in the new Norman E. Borlaug International Science and Technology Fellows Program. Launched by USDA in March 2004, the Borlaug program funds short-term, U.S.-based scientific training and exchange for researchers, policy makers, agribusiness people and university faculty in developing countries, with special emphasis on Africa, South America and Asia.

On the first day of the conference, Under Secretary Penn signed a memorandum of understanding with AATF (the African Agricultural Technology Foundation) to help address specific problems for African crops and conditions. Under the agreement, USDA will work with AATF to transfer appropriate technologies developed by USDA scientists to African researchers and then to the region's farmers.

"The signing of this memorandum of understanding," said AATF Executive Director Mpoko Bokanga, "is a major step toward accessing technology that is needed to increase the productivity of small-holder African farmers." AATF is an African-based public-private umbrella



organization that works to identify and promote the distribution of agricultural technologies to resource-poor farmers in sub-Saharan Africa.

The ministerial conference was organized around four central themes: water management and conservation, biotechnology and biosafety, public-private partnerships, and policies and regulatory frameworks that can help foster science-based solutions to lagging agricultural productivity. A pre-conference tour, luncheon session and workshop were devoted to the critical regional issues of water availability and efficient use, including affordable technologies and good irrigation practices.

Of the four themes, biotechnology got most of the media attention. But the conference did not turn West Africa into a battleground on biotechnology, as many headlines seemed to suggest.

Instead, conference participants quickly agreed that the debate over “whether biotechnology” is over. Their remarks focused mainly on how best to use the tools that biotechnology offers, how to target the benefits to farmers and consumers and how to ensure its proper regulation and use. Several speakers noted

that more research might be taking place in West Africa if the countries in the region had better defined, science-based regulations.

Each of the attending presidents voiced his support for science in general and biotechnology in particular to help make African agriculture more productive, efficient and profitable. In his remarks, Burkina Faso President Compaore said, “Considering the progress in science and technology, the third millennium will be the one of modern biotechnology.”

Before the end of the conference, West African ministers adopted a resolution calling for more research and investment in agricultural biotechnology and recommending the creation of a West African center for biotechnology. They also agreed to meet again in Bamako, Mali, to build on the progress made at the conference.

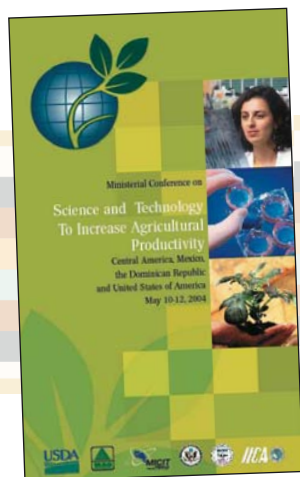
Although the conference focused on increasing productivity for staple and high-value crops, discussions also addressed the use of technology to enhance the nutritional value of food to improve health and help combat the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Another issue dis-

cussed by speakers was the importance of regional cooperation and partnerships, rather than countries with limited resources and expertise trying to tackle problems alone, or duplicating research or regulatory approaches already developed and widely accepted by others.

“All of these issues discussed are cars on the agricultural train,” Under Secretary Penn said in his closing remarks. “They are all connected, and they all can be pulled along by a science and technology engine. The momentum that we established this week has the train already moving, and now we need to pick up the speed.

“So it is up to you as ministers—the policy makers and political leaders—to determine both in your countries, and for the West African region, where that train is headed and how soon it gets there. We in the United States stand ready to take the ride with you.”

During the conference, U.S. officials also met with country delegations in separate bilateral and multilateral meetings, discussing a number of issues including Africa’s needs for technical assistance and training. As part of the ongoing effort to address these needs, USDA promised to arrange a U.S. cotton industry study tour



for officials from four cotton-exporting African countries.

The West African conference supported three U.S. presidential initiatives—the Initiative to End Hunger in Africa, the Water for the Poor Initiative and the Trade for African Development and Enterprise Initiative.

Central America Hosts First Regional Conference

A month before the West African conference, Secretary Veneman led a high-level U.S. delegation to Central America for the first regional conference under USDA's science and technology initiative. Nearly 200 participants, including 20 cabinet-level officials from 10 countries, gathered in Costa Rica in May 2004 for the Ministerial Conference on Science and Technology To Increase Agricultural Productivity.

In addition to the United States and Costa Rica, participating countries included Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama. All but the United States are members of CORECA, the Regional Council for Agricultural Cooperation.

PARTICIPANTS WERE ESPECIALLY INTERESTED IN THE POTENTIAL OF BIOTECHNOLOGY TO REDUCE COSTS AND INCREASE PRODUCTIVITY AND PROFITABILITY.

The nearly 35 speakers and presenters included Costa Rican President Abel Pacheco, Secretary Veneman, IICA Director General Chelston Brathwaite, U.S. Science Advisor to the Secretary of State George Atkinson and many other officials and experts representing different governments, industries, universities, research centers and nongovernmental organizations. The conference was held outside San José at the headquarters of IICA, which works to foster agricultural and rural development in the Americas.

In her opening message, Secretary Veneman spoke about the goals of the conference. "One of the greatest chal-

lenges before us," she said, "is to improve the lives of millions of people around the world through better diets and improved nutrition. And one of the most efficient means of doing that is through science and technology, making new knowledge, techniques and products widely available...to improve agricultural productivity [and] increase and improve food production."

She also announced funding for scientific training and exchange for Central American researchers and policy makers under USDA's Norman E. Borlaug International Science and Technology Fellows Program.

During the conference, ministers of agriculture sat down, some for the first time, with science and technology ministers to discuss the role of technology in raising agricultural productivity and how the two parts of government can work together. Similar meetings were repeated at the West African conference a month later, as ministers began to see the possibilities for agriculture to become much more than a tradition-bound, subsistence sector of the economy.

Many officials spoke about the impact rising agricultural productivity can have





on incomes and rural conditions, and they shared their vision of technology-driven, agriculture-led economic development.

Regional integration and cooperation was a major theme of this conference. Ministers recognized the importance of sharing information, identifying regional priorities, working through regional organizations and building public-private partnerships.

Presentations generated lengthy discussions on the benefits and costs of agricultural biotechnology. Participants from the region were especially interested in the potential of biotechnology to reduce costs and increase productivity and profitability.

At sessions on policy and regulatory frameworks, delegates agreed on the need for consistent and transparent policies to promote free trade, attract investment and encourage the development and adoption of productivity-enhancing technologies.

As in West Africa, the presence of ministers from different governments permitted separate bilateral and multilateral meetings on cooperation, trade and other issues. During these meetings, U.S. officials provided detailed information on a range of U.S. technical assistance programs in the region.

The meetings also provided an opportunity for participants to voice their support for regional and global trade reform initiatives and for continued U.S.-Central American cooperation on the fruit fly eradication program—a subject of considerable importance in the region.

In remarks at the closing session, Jim Butler, USDA Deputy Under Secretary for Farm and Foreign Agricultural Services, said, “We have discussed a shared vision to find solutions and to tap opportunities for applying science to real world

problems.... We all agree that countries which improve agricultural productivity are able to increase their incomes, participate in global markets, reduce hunger and poverty, and improve the quality of life for their citizens.”

More than 30 reporters and other media representatives attended the conference, providing extensive newspaper, radio and television coverage. During the conference, Secretary Veneman participated in the opening of IICA’s first historical gallery to honor the organization’s long history.

Follow-Up and Next Steps

In response to the challenges discussed at the 2003 Sacramento ministerial, USDA launched a wide range of workshops, briefings and other activities under its science and technology initiative, including the two follow-up regional conferences. The regional conferences generated their own flurry of activity.

In July 2004, USDA followed through on a commitment made during the West African conference, holding a special meeting with West African ambassadors in Washington, DC, to brief them on the many technical assistance and capacity-building programs available from U.S. government agencies. It was part of a continuing dialogue with African ambassadors that began after the Sacramento conference.

Also in July, ministers from Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad and Mali participated in a capacity-building tour of the U.S. cotton industry, followed by a meeting with Secretary Veneman and other USDA officials in Washington. A U.S. private-public sector team of cotton experts then traveled to West Africa from late September to mid-October 2004 to look

at the cotton industry there and suggest ways to improve production, transportation and processing.

In August, USDA welcomed the first 33 participants in the Norman E. Borlaug International Science and Technology Fellows Program, including three from Ghana in West Africa. The participants came to the United States for specialized training in such areas as agricultural production, processing and marketing at Texas A&M, Iowa State and Cornell Universities. USDA will sponsor about 100 participants each year under this program.

USDA will also share technologies and scientific resources through the agreement signed with AATF in Burkina Faso, and will help West Africa achieve its goals of creating a regional biotechnology center.

USDA and USAID are working with countries in West Africa, Central America and other developing regions on the issues discussed in the Sacramento ministerial and the two regional meetings, using a variety of programs providing technical assistance and training, cooperative research and exchange, development assistance and trade capacity-building.

“We continue to reach out to developing countries,” Secretary Veneman said, “to help them understand and utilize new technologies that will help them feed their own people.” ■

News releases, presentations, photographs and other materials from the two regional conferences are available on the FAS Web site: www.fas.usda.gov/icd/stconf/conf_main.html

